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Abigail Hochberger  
*Whitworth University*

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Conviction to Salvation: How the Salvation Army Moved from Orthodoxy to Saving Souls

Abigail Hochberger  
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Christianity in Britain  
Keith Beebe

Through the lives of Oxford students and ordained ministers, John Wesley (1703-1791) and George Whitefield (1714-1770), Methodism was born and flourished in England in the eighteenth century. Both humble servants of Christ, they preached from the Word of God, adding nothing new or untrue in the Gospel, and were able to take English parishioners to a deeper level of spirituality that they had not experienced before. According to the Reverend M. W. Patterson of Trinity College at Oxford, Wesley and Whitefield “dwealt on the old fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, but they preached them with conviction and power, and the Holy Spirit worked with them”<sup>1</sup>. What Wesley and Whitefield did differently was “appeal to the emotional rather than the intellectual side of their audiences.” Their experience with Jesus the Christ and His Word was far more than rituals and mundane expectant behavior, but a passionate longing to live for Him with fervor. This revivalism of the Anglican Church surely changed the face of religiosity in England and around the world.

This is the backdrop for the lives of Methodists William Booth and Catherine Mumford who became the founders of the Salvation Army. The success of the Salvation Army is due to the Booths’ decision to hold to their evangelical convictions and in their refusal to join the Anglican Church. The factors influencing that division involve women as part of the church, poverty-stricken Londoners, and the administering of the sacraments in the Salvation Army Church. This new direction would encompass the original evangelicalism and revivalism of the Methodist movement, making the Salvation Army the evangelistic and societal organization that it is today, 150 years later.

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<sup>1</sup> M. W. Patterson, *A History of the Church of England*, (Oxford: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929), 393.

William Booth (1829-1912) was born into an irreligious, poor family who lived in a Nottingham suburb of England. William's true conversion did not occur until his adolescent years, when an "eccentric lay preacher Isaac Marsden [stirred] his heart by warning that souls die every minute." He would be dedicated to opening the door to saving souls for the rest of his life. These early years in his twenties were the beginning of the Salvation Army, when he and friends would set out to give nightly sermons, leading to conversions, visiting the sick, and building up a following; an army, of sorts. Later in life, Booth remarked on this time, saying, "we had a miniature Salvation Army based on the principle that human nature was as religiously impressionable if not more so in its poorest, most ignorant and wretched forms as any other."<sup>2</sup> Booth's birth into a lower-class family allowed him to encounter what society sees as the least of these. Catherine Mumford (1829-1890), though born geographically near to William, came into an entirely different world. Catherine's parents were devout Methodists, but once her father turned to alcoholism, she became interested in the improvement of others' lives, dedicating herself to the plight of the poor and forgotten, especially that of women, much like Jesus did in his earthly ministry. Once they married in 1855, William took various positions as a lay pastor at posts around Nottingham for about nine years. By 1860, when William was holding a post at Gateshead's New Connexion Chapel, Catherine felt the Spirit urge her to say a few words near the end of William's sermon. He kindly stepped down as he listened to her words bring many to tears. At the time, this was revolutionary to have a woman in the pulpit speaking to a group of people in a church. We will see how her support of women's rights throughout her life was an essential factor of the success of the Salvation Army.

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<sup>2</sup> Norman Murdoch, *Origins of the Salvation Army*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 22.

While Catherine's upbringing attracted her to "convert the heathen"<sup>3</sup>, like Booth, it also led her to espouse the plight of women. W. T. Stead writes in his book, *Life of Mrs. Booth: The Founder of the Salvation Army*, "The desire to assert her woman's claim to rank as a human being... was wrought into her inmost being in the long years during which, as a tender and impressionable girl, she had seen her mother pleading mightily with God to arrest the downward steps of her backsliding father."<sup>4</sup> Having grown up in a home where the depravity of her alcoholic father was highlighted by the fact that he was supposed to be a pious, Methodist man of God, she developed a slight aversion to male superiority. She believed whole-heartedly that women were just as capable as men in every endeavor, yet they weren't given the opportunity in nineteenth century British society. "Woman, she admitted, had, for lack of education, of training, and of opportunity, been forced against her will into a position of comparative inefficiency in relation to the man and the public work of the world."<sup>5</sup> It was not the women who did not desire to learn, or have the capacity for it, but the social structure which denied them that right. "I love my sex," she exclaimed. "I desire... their moral and intellectual elevation; I believe it would be the greatest boon to our race." It is obvious here that Catherine's enthusiasm for the empowerment of women is not just for the female sex, but for society as a whole. How can society continue to grow and be morally elevated if only one half of them are educated enough to do so? Catherine championed women and continued to preach and educate herself and other women (and men) for the rest of her days, but it would not be easy. Female preaching in Wesleyan Methodism had already been banned for a long time during the mid-to-late nineteenth

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<sup>3</sup> W.T. Stead, *Life of Mrs. Booth: The Founder of the Salvation Army*, (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1900), 99

<sup>4</sup> Stead, 99-100.

<sup>5</sup> Stead, 99-100.

century. Andrew Mark Eason comments on the anti-feministic leanings of the Anglicans and Methodists, saying, “Within Methodism as a whole there was a growing conservatism among religious leaders, most of whom wished to adhere to supposed biblical injunctions against female preaching.”<sup>6</sup> The Methodists put their conservative roots before their desire to include everyone in speaking God’s word. This exclusion of women from preaching created tension between orthodox liturgy and the Booths’ Wesleyan revivalism, an essential characteristic of the Salvation Army.

As we have seen, God was at work in Catherine’s desire to minister to women, many of whom were part of the poorer population of London. At the time of the mid nineteenth century, England was undergoing an industrial revolution which caused the majority of the population of England to move from the countryside into the cities. R. David Rightmire says in his book, *Sacraments of the Salvation Army: Pneumatological Foundations*, “the great social and economic transformation that England experienced during these years [1837-1901] was the direct result of urban industrialization.”<sup>7</sup> People followed work. In this case, work was found in factories which were built in rapidly growing urbanized centers. With this social and economic change that Rightmire talks about came changing standards of religiosity. “Although the middle class of Victorian England went to church or chapel, the city laborers were predominantly unchurched. This phenomenon was chiefly due to the immigration of millions of country folk to the cities.”<sup>8</sup> As immigrants and country people flooded in, religion faded out. The poorest of the

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Eason, *Women in God’s Army: Gender Equality in the Early Salvation Army*, (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2003), 102.

<sup>7</sup> David R. Rightmire, *Sacraments and the Salvation Army: Pneumatological Foundations*, (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1990), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Rightmire, 7.

poor were kept in meager living conditions, affecting the mentality of nearly one-tenth of the population. Rightmire remarks further that, “Anticlericalism reigned supreme among the working class, who felt that they had been excluded and neglected, and they wanted to have nothing to do with the established order.”<sup>9</sup> The Booths ministering to the poor in the cities had a difficult task ahead of them: to work toward *creating* a ministry in which the poor could feel accepted. It meant not working within the confines of the Anglican Church that had, perhaps accidentally, alienated so much of the population. The lack of spirituality prompted the Booths to promote awakening among the English people, not *just* in the Christians, but in everyone, in order to reach the growing number of people in the slums. This economic and social change that was sweeping England created “fertile soil for evangelistic endeavor.”<sup>10</sup> William Booth took that soil and planted seeds of change. By 1883, the Salvation Army accomplished a tremendous feat of transition, redirecting the attention of the Salvation Army to better relate and minister to the poor of London.

Not only did women in ministry and the inclusion of the poor cause an uproar in Methodist circles, but the administering of the sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, in the Salvation Army became quite a hot topic in the early 1880s. Eason says in his journal entry entitled, *Sacraments in Victorian Britain: Retracing the Steps to Non-observance*,

To the extent that significant dissension existed, it was traceable to outsiders like the Church of England critic from Bristol, who considered it scandalous for a female officer to baptize anyone. To a lesser extent the same could have been said of male officers, because all of William Booth’s full-time evangelists were commissioned rather than ordained.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Rightmire, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Rightmire, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Eason, “The Salvation Army and the Sacraments in Victorian Britain: Retracing the Steps to Non-observance.” *Fides et Historia* 41, no. 2 (2009): 56-57.

To the Church of England, the idea of men *and* women who had not been ordained by the church to baptize or give the Lord's Supper was completely unorthodox and frankly, unacceptable.

Eason talks about the frequency and length of the administering of the Lord's Supper in the early years of the Salvation Army, when it was still the Christian Mission. "Ritualism was not supposed to dominate the worship of the Christian Mission, but even the minimal requirements of this directive betrayed some appreciation for the Lord's Supper."<sup>12</sup> By members of the mission, it was regarded as favorable; it was a privilege to be able to share in a gift of Jesus with other believers. Controversy began to arise when a greater number of women administered the Lord's Supper. Contrary to what one might think, the Church of England actually considered taking the Salvation Army under its wing around 1882, because of the success in attendance and ability to reach the masses. As the Anglican Church explored the matter further, church officials changed their minds, turning their noses at the idea, finding "it increasingly hard to stomach the sensational methods of the Salvation Army."<sup>13</sup> It became clear that if Booth wished for the Salvation Army to join the Church of England, he would have to sacrifice his autocratic, military-style leadership and put ritualism ahead of passionate evangelicalism. After about one year of amicable relations with the Church of England, Booth "finally issued a memorandum prohibiting officers from bringing their corps members to any sacramental [Anglican] church service."<sup>14</sup> Before this statement, the Salvation Army was already implicitly an organization in its own right, but in 1883, it was made clear. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper was still a formative experience for those in the corps. Booth said in the same

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew Eason, "The Salvation Army and the Sacraments in Victorian Britain: Retracing the Steps to Non-observance." *Fides et Historia* 41, no. 2 (2009): 57.

<sup>13</sup> Eason, "The Salvation Army and the Sacraments in Victorian Britain," 64.

<sup>14</sup> Eason, 69.



year, “Let us remember Him who died for us continually. Let us remember His love every hour of our lives, and continually feed on him—not on Sundays only, and the forget Him all the week, but let us by faith eat his flesh and drink His blood continually... all to the Glory of God.”<sup>15</sup>

As we can see from the beginning of their lives, William and Catherine had a seed planted in them to minister to the poor, outcast, and down-trodden. Their desire was to combine Wesleyan revivalism and Methodism—passionate evangelical preaching and true doctrine. A London mission for the “heathen masses” would be the first fruits of their Christian Mission, soon to be the Salvation Army, in 1865. Their mission was already considered unorthodox in nature, by allowing women to preach and seeking out the poor. They took their convictions one step further by separating the Salvation Army from traditional sacramental ceremonies, paving the way for one of the largest, most influential Christian mission organizations in the world. The Booths were true disciples of Christ.

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<sup>15</sup> Eason, 71.

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